



Mayor Steve Padilla in the corridors of South County power.
(photo/Alan Decker)

Ex-Cop, Ex-Teacher, Single Dad, Mayor And A Low-Key Latino

Ashley And A Quarter Million People Are Depending On Steve Padilla

BY TIMOTHY J. McCLAIN

Steve Padilla is late but the sounds of running feet announce his arrival. Is it pressing business as the mayor of San Diego County's second largest city that has him 15 minutes behind schedule? Nah. His daughter, Ashley, 8, is enjoying the first day out of school

and she and Dad have spent the morning kicking back. Now Ashley races into the stuffy confines of Chula Vista City Hall, greeting staffers with hugs as her father trails behind. He looks at Ashley and smiles.

Such is life for single-father Padilla, 36, the first Latino mayor of San Diego's second largest, and fastest growing, city.

While Ashley giggles, the mayor, seven

months into his first term, must grapple with a city where service levels are missing goals, slow-growth forces are getting restless and prudent fiscal planning may be undone by state budget problems.

From The Beginning

Bumping past 200,000 residents this year, Chula Vista is far different from the small town

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of 40,000 when Padilla was born in 1967 in National City. His parents were Sweetwater High School sweethearts who had graduated a year earlier. His father survived a tour of Vietnam with the Marines, only to die in an automobile accident when Steve was 5, his brother, Kevin, 2, and his mother seven months pregnant with a third son, Jason.

A year later, the family moved to College Estates, the neighborhood adjacent to Southwestern College and a lot of open space. "I remember my grandmother had a fit because my mother was moving us out to the boon-docks, to the edge of the empire," Padilla recalls.

His mother remarried in 1976 and his sister was born in 1981. He is a product of public schools, Bonita Vista middle and high schools, and later Southwestern College. Padilla admits to being an average student, interested in sports and social activities but not student politics. Police work intrigued him and in high school he joined the Explorer Scouts.

In his senior year, Padilla was accepted into the police academy and graduated at age 19. He joined the Coronado Police Department reserves and got a day job at the courthouse in Chula Vista. In 1988 he was commissioned a regular officer in Coronado, a job he held until leaving in 1999 as a detective.

Getting A Taste For Politics

Those years on the police force as a union representative drew on meal-time lessons learned from his stepfather. "You should have seen our dinner table growing up," he says. "I always kept one eye on the news and read the newspapers. I was fascinated by foreign affairs and national politics and issues. We used to drive my mother nuts because nightly at the dinner table we would have these arguments. I think he was trying to teach me to think. He would almost always take the exact opposite position. We would start arguing until (my mother) would put an end to it and say, 'This is



City Hall planners are challenged to accommodate the county's fastest growing population.

the dinner table, knock it off."

In the late 1980s, Padilla got involved in Democratic politics, serving as publicity chair for the Young Democrats of San Diego County and working on the 1988 presidential campaign. By 1989 he was digging in locally. "I decided that I might be interested in paying attention to what was going on in the community and having a hand in it. I decided to get involved on boards."

His first appointment came in 1989 to the Chula Vista 2000 Task Force where he was assigned open space and environmental issues. He later served on the ethics and safety commissions. "I stayed active," he says. "I started following city politics."

The First Campaign

Padilla pondered running for office in 1992, but held off until 1994 when Councilman Len Moore's term expired. Facing a pair of political veterans, he landed the endorsement of police and fire unions. A young cop with a pregnant wife, he parlayed 48.4 percent of the vote in the primary into a huge November win, becoming the first Latino elected to the Chula Vista City Council.

Serving as consultant for that campaign was Tom Oriola, today the special assistant to the mayor and chief policy adviser for the City Council.

Oriola recalls meeting Padilla during the campaign to elect Tim Nader as mayor following the death from cancer of Mayor Gayle McCandliss. Padilla shared his thoughts of running for council; Oriola concluded he was still a little young. With Oriola contributing political strategy, and Padilla helping place signs, Nader won, besting political veteran Frank Scott in what ranks as one of the city's biggest election upsets. Nader left office later after failing to win a seat in the state Assembly.

But Padilla and Oriola stayed in contact. And when Padilla decided to run for mayor, he tapped Oriola as his chief consultant. "He made me go to his parents' house and meet with his family and everybody to explain what a council campaign was going to be like," Oriola recalls. "He was really close to his family."

As the campaign progressed, Oriola grew confident his client was a winner.

"I knew by his profile and how the race was turning out he was going to get elected," Oriola says. "I had this cop that was well spoken and could raise money. I knew I would run a different campaign than anyone else. We ran him as a person running for council who was a policeman, not a Latino."



Coors Amphitheatre has brought A List entertainment to the South County

When it came time for re-election in 1998, Padilla had earned a reputation as an independent thinker. Although he faced a sitting school board member, he won easily. He also helped elect fresh faces, like his future mayoral opponent Mary Salas, the council's first elected Latina.

The election tilted the council's balance of power and hastened the city manager's retirement. Padilla raised his profile even more by speaking out strongly against a possible ballot effort that could have allowed then-Mayor Shirley Horton to extend her term.

Running For Mayor

As jockeying for the 2002 mayor's race began, it became apparent that Padilla and Salas would be the two main contenders.

Early polls showed Padilla with a 10 point lead. But Salas had been out front on calling for the resignation of the city's port commissioner, David Malcolm, on conflict of interest charges and the race tightened. In the primary, neither candidate won 50 percent of the vote.

Neither finalist was a clear favorite. Salas was a popular, high-profile representative for Chula Vista who was the better known candidate countywide.

Padilla stuck closer to home, in part because he had gained custody of his daughter in the divorce. (He says he has good relations with his ex-wife, who moved out of state after he got custody of his daughter on Jan. 23, 1999, the day after his birthday. The divorce records are public. Ashley will spend much of the summer with her since-remarried mother and Padilla jokes she has more frequent flier miles than any 8-year-old he knows.)

While Padilla attends his share of city functions, he acknowledges little interest in the

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event circuit, particularly in the evenings. "This position of leadership is not about how many rubber chicken gatherings you attend," he says. "I could be at an event every night. But you have to be able to have balance from a personal and professional level, particularly when you are raising a child. It is easy to be on the family values stump; it is another thing to do it."

That responsibility caused him to leave police work shortly after getting custody of Ashley. The rigid work schedule and 3 a.m. phone calls did not mesh with that duty. It also helped keep him out of a 2000 bid for state Assembly. "I didn't think it was appropriate to abandon my daughter just after getting custody of her and that is what I would have had to do," he says.

The neck-and-neck mayor's race seemed to break Padilla's way when Salas was put on the defensive for using the word "gringo" in a newspaper article and then a talk radio interview. Until then, Padilla was facing scrutiny for accepting more developer campaign money, overstating his role as a substitute teacher and being slow to criticize Malcolm, who ironically he had clashed with behind the scenes.

On election day he won by eight points, a comfortable margin.

Inevitable Growth Challenges

As Padilla governs a community where nearly one in every three new homes in San Diego County are being built, he does so from a position of having grown up at a time when many of those neighborhoods were once his playground.

"We were surrounded by canyons," he recalls. "We could go over to Southwestern College and monkey around and get chased off by campus police. We'd take canyons to Bonita and the golf course. It was just normal. You didn't worry too much about (safety). Today it is sort of sad. You can't let (children) take off



Bayfront parks are nice, but what Chula Vista's waterfront really needs is fresh waterfront retail and housing. How much is the big civic question.

and be out of sight."

Growth in Chula Vista is inevitable. A city that in 1911 totaled 3,450 acres today has 32,380. Of that, 22,717 acres are east of Interstate 805. In the most recent fiscal year, the total assessed value grew 13.95 percent to \$13.5 billion. By percentage, only San Marcos' 17.01 increase to \$5.6 billion was higher, and Chula Vista is rapidly gaining on No. 2, Carlsbad, which grew 6.7 percent to \$14.8 billion.

As that growth happens, open space disappears.

"On a purely emotional basis, if I were a multi-billionaire and could have written the check to buy the Otay Ranch and preserve it, I would have," Padilla says. "But you have to have balance. The city has to make sure development pays its own way, pays for impacts and infrastructure. And you have to make sure that it is planned in a manner that is appropriate. It is one of those things where the real challenge is in the planning process."

"People have known in this community for half a century that Chula Vista was going to grow up. And the whole challenge was how."

Pressure, Traffic, Pressure

As a community, Chula Vista has earned high-marks for managing its growth. The EastLake and McMillin-developed communities have earned more than their share of awards while Otay Ranch now is a destination for planners around the world. Those homes that seem too densely packed for some are like that because about 70 percent of the land is being set aside as open space. A master plan for a greenbelt to connect the Sweetwater River and Otay River Valley open space areas is winding its way through the approval process.

In the mid-to-late 1980s, when the city of San Diego was embroiled in a pitched slow-growth movement, builders in eastern Chula Vista sniffed unease in the breeze and voluntarily stopped pulling permits. With traffic a big issue, Corky McMillin spent millions to widen East H Street ahead of schedule while the Bob Santos-led EastLake did the same for Telegraph Canyon Road. Eventually, a formula was forged that ties new home permits to very specific items, such as ensuring the development of three acres of parks for every 1,000 new residents.

A similar situation recently played out as Olympic Parkway through Otay Ranch was completed as a six-lane road far ahead of schedule. The road's completion has relieved some traffic pressure, as will some other



New libraries like this one in EastLake have kept up with the city's growth.

improvements. But until State Route 125, a north-south toll road from the border to State Route 54, is completed in 2005, conditions are likely to worsen and the Padilla council will face pressure to take action. Indeed, a revision to the city's growth plans is in the works that likely will call for stricter infrastructure/permit standards.

On Being Latino

While Padilla's ethnicity undoubtedly works to his advantage in a city where 49 percent of the residents are Latino, he says he is far removed from the "old guard" that believed you make race, culture and ethnicity the central principle around which everything is modeled.

"I come from a different generation," he says. "While preserving and celebrating diversity is important, the objective in our society in America is to make race and your cultural background, as far as government and opportunity go, less relevant, not more relevant. ... I have always taken the approach, 'Don't tell me I have to have a district full of Latinos to get elected.'"

Padilla notes he was first elected by an overwhelmingly non-Latino electorate. "Now that is a statement about opportunity and change and progress and only in America."

One of the turning points in the mayor's race, he says, was when community discussion turned to who was the "real" Latino. His mother was Portuguese, apparently not "real" enough for some. "I really took offense at that," he says. "I think when I finally put a light on it, it made a difference. I was able to hit my stride in getting the message out to people that picking a mayor is serious business. It is about who has the best skills, the best ideas and the best perspective for leading the people."

Before the mayoral election, Padilla and Salas were friends. Now, he says, after several emotional lunches — "I mean emotional in a good way" — they are friends again. With that in mind, and since the other three members of the council endorsed his mayoral bid, the har-

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Mayor Padilla envisions a large redevelopment district in old Chula Vista that would bring more restaurant options.

mony can be read as productive by some, unnerving by others.

Building Coalitions

Padilla has a knack for rebuilding political relationships. One of his biggest supporters is Councilwoman Patty Davis; in 1998 he worked for her opponent. Today she shrugs that off and says his vision and skills fit what the community desires. "They see Steve as a highly intellectual person who is not afraid to stand up and say something if he sees there is another point we need to think about," Davis says.

Such sentiment rings true with Mark Porter, who met Padilla in 1989 when Porter was a Coronado police rookie. The pair worked together and Porter says he was equally impressed with Padilla's communication skills as president of the Coronado Police Officers Association and on the job.

"He has the knowledge combined with the ability in the same package," Porter says. "He knew what to do and he did it very well. An example would be not just knowing the law but knowing how to explain it to the suspect and the victim. He is an extremely intelligent individual."

Among those who may be interested in the striking unity Padilla has engendered on the council is City Manager David Rowlands. The

new mayor wants the council to adopt a stronger role in setting policy, something that often in the past was handled by city staff, Padilla says.

Fiscally, Chula Vista is in good shape. The recently adopted \$244.4 million budget is 14 percent larger than last year, but mainly because of a large payment required to the state pension fund that serves city employees. The operating budget is up a scant 2.8 percent to \$122.8 million and the city's reserves are about a quarter of that, \$31 million.

Padilla is anxiously watching Sacramento lawmakers struggle with the state budget. One worse-case scenario would strip the city of \$12 million in vehicle license fee revenue. "In the short term, we can absorb the impact on this budget," he says.

Elusive Bayfront Dreams

Since the 1970s, Chula Vista has struggled to develop its bayfront. A bid to build a meeting hotel on a former gunpowder factory and garbage dump was defeated by environmentalists. Instead, a nature interpretive center was constructed, the site cleaned and restored and two-thirds of the entire undeveloped bayfront set aside as a preserve.

When a developer proposed 2,000 condos and three acres of parks for the remaining 116 acres, the citizens objected mightily. The plans are again under discussion, this time with officials of the San Diego Unified Port District which controls a 138-acre chunk of adjacent property.

"It has not been easy," Padilla says. "But I am very confident that at the end of the day we will get something done on that bayfront."

Whatever happens will be very public. That's in large part because an old growth watchdog group, Crossroads, has recently reconstituted itself as Crossroads II, billing members \$10 a year to subscribe to its newsletter.

Crossroads not only is watching the bayfront, but also is nervous about efforts to bring density — redevelopment — to the city's older parts.

Patricia Aguilar, the group's president, worries that redevelopment in old Chula Vista will not pay for the impacts it creates.

"At our last count there were between 1,500 and 2,000 new dwelling units in the pipeline," Aguilar says. "That doesn't include the bayfront, where all by itself the developer is proposing 2,000 units. And unlike the east side, there's no requirement for these developers to contribute to pots of money to create parks or improve transportation or provide money

beyond the minimal state requirement for schools. We feel the same growth management requirements should apply to the west side as well as the east side."

So far, Aguilar is both wary and encouraged by Padilla.

"I am hopeful," she says. "I feel that the mayor has a balanced point of view about development in Chula Vista. I feel that he does empathize with our concern. Those are my impressions. I hope I am right. Again, the jury is still out. But I have no reason to feel that he will be an advocate for growth regardless of the consequences."

Padilla and the council must respect the group's concerns. In the past, while not so organized, its members have defeated placing a string of new car dealers along East H Street and turning the land in front of Southwestern College into a shopping center building a police station in Friendship Park across from City Hall.

Responding to such concerns, Padilla points to how the Centre City Development Corp. has revitalized Downtown San Diego. He wants to emulate that agency over a large swath of western Chula Vista. If successful, the effort would capture increased property tax dollars that otherwise flow to Sacramento, allowing the city to use the funds for bonds to buy infrastructure. In addition, Padilla has ensured that 75 percent of this year's capital improvement budget, about \$29.3 million, will be spent in older neighborhoods.

Revitalizing the old parts of the city would bring new restaurants and other retail development, he says. It also would boost sales tax collections, an area where Chula Vista now trails by 10 percent the region's average collections.

The Business Of Attracting Business

So far, Chula Vista's success with housing has not been paralleled by its business growth. In mornings, the citizenry flows north to jobs in San Diego. The hope is the city's efforts helping in creating success stories like Gateway in old Chula Vista and Hitachi in new Chula Vista will get noticed by other major employers.

Jeff Wissler, the director of project development for McMahon Development Group, can vouch for how the city's "Red Team" can hurry along approvals. In McMahon's building of Hitachi Home Electronics' North American headquarters in the EastLake Business Park, Wissler says the Red Team cut about 45 days from the approval process for the 85,000-

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square-foot building. The company secured its permits in June of last year, started construction three months later and Hitachi moved in last month.

"Where the city was instrumental was, No. 1, in accelerating the processing time and entitlement process," Wissler says. "The city and EastLake provided us with a significant amount of relief in terms of fees, in excess of \$1 million."

McMahon has several other projects going in Chula Vista and Wissler predicts the second phase of the EastLake Business Park, where Hitachi is located, will become a premier South County address.

The Chula Vista Chamber of Commerce supports Padilla. Its president, Kevin Carlson, calls him "a great mayor."

A Veteran's Perspective

Greg Cox is the South County's senior politician. He was elected to the Chula Vista council in June 1976, elected mayor in November 1981 and joined the San Diego County Board of Supervisors in January 1995 after spending 4 1/2 years out of public office.

The city he faced as mayor was about to lay the groundwork that supports today's growth. The times, too, were different.

"I had the benefit of a healthy and growing economy," Cox recalls. "We had the opportunity to do a lot of exciting projects. The Olympic Training Center, the Nature Interpretive Center, new parks and a library. It was an exciting time to be in office. Now is an exciting time to be in office. You have several things imploding on

you. A shaky economy and a state government that is looking at ways to take your revenue. Local government for the next few years is going to be in a defensive position. ... It is a much more challenging time to serve. People's expectations are just as high or higher and yet the ability to provide the resources has diminished significantly."

For Fun And Future

For fun, Padilla likes to travel or be outdoors at the beach or his family's cabin on Mount Laguna. Most days he picks up Ashley from daycare and makes dinner. The pair hang out on weekends and last summer shared a concert date to see No Doubt at Coors Amphitheater. Soon they'll enjoy cruising around in his new BMW M3.

Asked to read his political future tea leaves, Padilla admits to wanting a second term. "I really would like to do eight years and make a positive difference."

He has no desire to exit the field.

"I love the political process, the legislative process. I am a policy nerd," he says.

So far, seven months into his new job, Padilla is having a good time.

"How can I complain?" he says. "I was elected at 35 to be the mayor of the county's second largest city. It is the most dynamic city in the county. I have been elected the mayor of the community where I grew up at a time when it is about to step out on its own. It is not easy; this is not a nine to five job. It is a tremendous opportunity." If he does it right, Ashley will have even more reason to smile. ♦

SAN DIEGO
Metropolitan
UPTOWN EXAMINER & DAILY BUSINESS REPORT

July 2003 • Volume 18/Number 10

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